

Remarks at the South Dakota Victory Fund Dinner June 4, 1998

Thank you so much, Senator Daschle. I wish I had taped that—[*laughter*—and every time I'd get kind of discouraged or down, I could just flip on the tape and listen to Tom's voice.

Thank you all. I thank the other Members of the Senate for being here. And Mayor Barger, thank you for coming. And some of you have come from even further away than South Dakota, and I thank all of you for being here for a truly magnificent leader of the Senate and of our party and for our country.

I had a very interesting few days and sort of thinking about the past, the present, and the future. I had my 30th college reunion over the weekend. And I thought, I don't know where all those years went. I had occasion to go to Texas and do a little work for our party and for the Members of the House of Representatives but also to go into an Hispanic neighborhood that no President had visited since Franklin Roosevelt, to talk about the relationship of the census to the service of the community in building it up.

Then I came back for a meeting on the situation in India and Pakistan and sent Secretary Albright off to meet with the Foreign Ministers of China and Russia and Great Britain and France. And they issued a very fine statement today, and we're working hard on that.

Then I went to Cleveland, where I had the chance to go to the annual convention of something called City Year. It's one of our AmeriCorps national service projects that began in Boston. And I visited with them in 1991 when I started out, and there were just 100 people. And now, there are all these young people from all over America, part of nearly 90,000 people who have been in our AmeriCorps program serving our country, earning credits for college.

And then today I had a chance to appear at the SAVER Summit, where delegates from both parties and all walks of life in America talked about how we can save Social Security for the 21st century and increase pension savings and private savings, something that really matters to the long-run health of the country. And I got to appear at, in effect, a homecoming for me: I went to the Democratic Leadership

Conference for a meeting of elected local officials around the country.

And it's just been great, because it's been—for me, it's been a week where I've gotten to reflect on the last 30 years and think about the next 30 to 50 years—and also to be humbled a little along the way. I was in this great school yesterday in Cleveland, seeing what my AmeriCorps volunteers are doing, and I was shaking hands with all the kids. And I came up to this young man; he was about so tall. He couldn't have been over 7; he was probably 6. And he looked up to me and he said, "Are you really the President?" I said, "Yes, I am." He said, "You aren't dead yet?" [*Laughter*] At first I thought, what's a 6-year-old kid doing reading the Washington press every day? [*Laughter*] And then I realized that, in fact, "the President" was George Washington and Abraham Lincoln—he thought part of the job qualification was being dead. [*Laughter*] It was a wonderful thing. I say this just to kind of make a setting for the very brief points I want to make.

When I ran for President in 1992, I thought the country needed a different direction. And I came with a certain set of ideas and ideals and some very specific proposals to implement. And I couldn't have done it if it hadn't been for Tom Daschle.

Then when we went into the minority in the Senate, and Tom was elected leader, and we had to work so closely together or we never would have gotten a balanced budget that also opened the doors of college to all Americans who are willing to work for it, through tax credits and scholarships and grants and work-study positions—we just wouldn't have been able to do it. We never would have been able to get a balanced budget that also added 5 million children to the ranks of those with health insurance in our country. We never would have been able to get a balanced budget that would continue to grow the economy, but still invest in the environment and in medical research and all the things that will build our future.

And I never cease to marvel about how much he knows and has to deal with and how he has to deal with all these substantive issues

which I deal with, but unlike me, he also has to figure out how to wind his way through the Senate rules and the personalities and this stuff. I just never—people asked me these questions; I said, “I’ll call Tom. He’ll know what to do.” [Laughter] I don’t have to worry about that.

And I don’t think you can possibly imagine how much it means to a President to know that there is a leader in the Senate with that kind of brain power, that kind of integrity, that kind of energy, and that kind of deep compassion for our country. And it’s a great national resource. He’s good in a fight and good when we’re making a principled compromise. And he’s always trying to do what’s right for the country. And along the way, he sometimes gets me to do a thing or two for South Dakota. [Laughter]

Now, I say that to make this point: We are all very lucky here, each in our own way. We wouldn’t be able to be here if we hadn’t enjoyed some good fortune in life. And maybe in our less reflective moments we think we earned everything we got, but most of us were not born in a log cabin we built ourself. And most of us have had a break or two along the way. And I think—the point I’d like to make tonight is I think we’re very fortunate to be living in this time.

I’m proud of the fact that we have the lowest crime rates in 25 years, the lowest welfare rolls in 27 years, the lowest unemployment in 28 years. We’re going to have the first balanced budget and a surplus in 29 years. We’ve got the lowest inflation in 32 years, the smallest government in 35 years, and the highest homeownership in history. That makes me feel proud of our country.

But the point I want to make—and I guess it’s just because I’ve been thinking about it as much as I have this week, although I’ve felt this way always—is that the country is now working as it ought to work, and therefore we now have both the freedom, the emotional space, the financial means, and the sense of confidence to look at the larger challenges facing us, the long-term problems.

That’s why I liked that SAVER Summit today. When all the baby boomers like me get into the retirement, if present trends continue, there will only be about two people working for every one person drawing. We have got to reform the Social Security system, or we won’t be able to have a decent retirement without unfairly burdening our children and their ability to raise

our grandchildren. That’s a big long-term issue; same thing is true about Medicare.

We got a person or two here today, I think, from Texas—people in Texas have had a real good, fresh impression of what climate change is doing because of all the wildfires raging in Mexico that are bringing the smoke over into Texas and affecting the quality of air and the health care, the health of the people there. We don’t have to give up economic growth to preserve the planet, but we have to change the strategy by which we pursue it. And we’re smart enough to do that. That’s a big long-term problem that we need to face.

We have a great economy, but we don’t have the world’s best public schools—even though we have the world’s best colleges. We can’t stop until every child in this country has the chance to get an excellent education.

We have this great economy with a low unemployment rate, but there’s still pockets in America, from inner cities to Native American tribes in South Dakota, where there has been virtually no impact of the free enterprise revolution. And we now have a chance to bring it there.

Now, if we were up to our ears in alligators and we were worried about going broke with the debt and we were worried about all the problems that were bearing down on this country when I became President, we wouldn’t have the space or the confidence or the sense of possibility to think about these things. But now we do, and now we must, because this window will not stay open forever. In the nature of human events, things change. And we are so fortunate.

It was this week 30 years ago that Robert Kennedy was killed, culminating a pretty awful spring for America, just a couple of months after Martin Luther King was killed and Washington, DC, burned. I remember it very well. I was a student here working for the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and I put a red cross on my car, and I drove down into Washington and delivered supplies to people who were living in church basements because they’d been burned out.

In so many ways, for me, at least, as a young man, what Robert Kennedy represented—an attempt to break out of the old orthodoxies, to bring people together across the lines that divided us, to kind of go beyond politics as usual to actually get something done that would touch people’s lives and move this country forward

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together—represents what I have tried to do as President.

For 30 years, because of all kinds of problems we had, divisions too often triumphed over unity, and we were too often preoccupied with things that were right in front of our nose. Now we have a chance to deal with the long-term challenges of the country. Now we have a chance to prove that we can be an even more diverse, multiethnic, multireligious, multiracial democracy and be more unified. And in a world where other people are having trouble dealing with that in almost every continent, that's more important than ever before. And for me, I think we have a chance to restore not only our country but also our party to the direction that was basically interrupted 30 years ago when the country divided over war and race and two of

our greatest leaders were killed within a few weeks of each other.

None of that is happening now. And I'm telling you, we have an opportunity, but it is also a profound obligation, to give our children and grandchildren the America they deserve and the America of our dreams, the America most of us growing up thought we could create and missed terribly when it wasn't possible. If we do that, it will be in no small measure because of the unusual service, in a very difficult position of the person we are here to honor tonight.

Thank you, and God bless you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 8:25 p.m. at the Sheraton Luxury Collection Hotel. In his remarks, he referred to Mayor Brenda Barger of Watertown, SD.

Commencement Address at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Cambridge, Massachusetts

June 5, 1998

Thank you, Dr. Vest. I think you're the real thing. *[Laughter]* Chairman d'Arbeloff, Dr. Gray, members of the corporation, the faculty, especially to the members of the Class of 1998 and your families, the Classes of 1948 and 1973, Mayor Duehay, members of the City Council. I thank the Brass Ensemble for the wonderful music before. Let me say I am profoundly honored to be here on the same platform with Dr. David Ho and grateful for the work he has done for humanity.

When we met a few moments ago in President Vest's office with a number of the students and other officials of the university, I said you had a good representation of speakers today, the scientists and the scientifically challenged. *[Laughter]*

But my administration has been able to carry on in no small measure because of contributions from MIT. Sixteen MIT alumni and faculty members have served in important positions in this administration, including at least two who are here today, the former Secretary of the Air Force, Sheila Widnall, and the Deputy Secretary of Energy, Ernie Moniz. Four of your faculty members and your president have done important work for us. I thank them all.

And I come here today with good news and bad news for the graduates. The good news is that this morning we had our latest economic report: unemployment is 4.3 percent; there have been 16 million new jobs in the last 5 years; there are numerous job openings that pay well. The bad news is that you now have no excuse to your parents if you don't go to work. *[Laughter]*

MIT is admired around the world as a crucible of creative thought, a force for progress, a place where dreams of generations become reality. The remarkable discoveries and inventions of the MIT community have transformed America. Early in your history, MIT was known for advances in geology and mining. By mid-century, MIT pioneered x rays and radar. Today, it's atomic lasers, artificial intelligence, biotechnology. MIT has done much to make this the American Century. And MIT will do more to make America and the world a better place in the 21st century, as we continue our astonishing journey through the information revolution, a revolution that began not as our own did, here in Massachusetts, with a single shot heard around the world, but instead was sparked by many catalysts, in labs and libraries, startups